

**A Public Health Communications Response to the Influenza Vaccine Shortage**  
**The Pinellas County Health Department**  
**Pinellas County, Florida**

**Accomplishments**

An internal and external response to the October 5, 2004 news of a shortage of influenza (flu) vaccine was rapidly developed and implemented. Actions included:

- Rapid and straightforward communication with all 600 employees including switchboard operators within 3 hours of initial knowledge of the flu vaccine shortage
- Tools were provided for effective communication with the public and other stakeholders including the most current facts, a link to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Web site, regularly updated talking points, flow-chart-based guidance for working with dissatisfied callers, and handouts on flu prevention (e.g., proper hand-washing technique)
- A Flu Information Line was established immediately
- A Flu Vaccine Information component was added to the Pinellas County Health Department (PCHD) Web site
- Flu-specific messaging was also provided via the PCHD local access TV channel and an epidemiology newsletter, in addition to standard channels

These actions were associated with:

- A lower level of public alarm than would otherwise be anticipated
- Acceptance with little complaint by employees of the news that traditionally free flu vaccine would not be available

**Introduction and Background**

Florida is known for its sizable senior population. The Pinellas County Health Department is responsible for the health and safety of all of the 924,610 citizens as well as the numerous visitors to the county. Pinellas County has a significantly higher percentage of citizens 65 year of age or older (22.5%) compared to the state of Florida (17.0%). The median income level for persons living in Pinellas County is \$37,000, compared to \$38,000 for the state of Florida. Accordingly, Pinellas County is a not-so-affluent county in a not-so-affluent state. Each November, our county population increases significantly as the “snowbirds” arrive from the north.

During the 2003-2004 flu season, the Pinellas County Health Department ordered and received 12,060 adult doses of flu vaccine and 160 doses of FluMist®, and immunized 10,813 people through community outreach and our four health centers. For the 2004-2005 flu season, we ordered 8,000 adult doses of flu vaccine from the Chiron Corporation. Our plan was to order more if needed, based on demand.

At noon on Tuesday, October 5, 2004 a phone call was received from a local reporter about a reported serious flu vaccine shortage and possible rationing. This was our first knowledge of the news about a vaccine shortage. We asked the reporter for a facsimile copy of the report and promised that we would follow-up soon.

The news was quickly verified during a meeting with the health department director and the manager of our immunizations program. At this point, we began to plan our strategy for how to approach this evolving situation. From the beginning, we have been straightforward with *all* our stakeholders, including PCHD employees, the community, healthcare partners and the media.

### **Communicating with Health Department Employees**

Within three hours of receiving the news, we sent an email to all PCHD employees, outlining the latest information. This action was particularly important in view of the anticipation of phone calls from the media, an anxious public, and employees. The email included the latest facts about the flu vaccine shortage, a link to the CDC Web site, and a promise to employees to keep them informed as we received new information. Staff was reminded to refer media calls to the Public Information Officer (PIO). This approach makes it easier for employees to serve the public and to make individual decisions about their own lives, family and friends by giving them the tools they need to communicate effectively with the public.

PCHD switchboard operators received a verbal briefing as well as the email. We maintain regular contact with our staff, using email, phone and direct communications. Ongoing media coverage makes essential the provision of frequent assurance to staff that the flu vaccine situation is not an emergency.

Employees were also told that they would not receive the traditional free flu shots for the 2004-2005 season. This information was communicated via an all-staff email that also provided some updated information about the vaccine shortage. Most staff understood and accepted this news with little complaint because they were kept informed from the beginning. As a small gesture in lieu of free flu shots, and also as good public health practice, we provided individual bottles of hand sanitizer to each employee for use at their workstation.

To further assist employees in dealing with the public during this dynamic challenge, we also provide regularly updated talking points. Tips for dealing with unhappy phone callers and a flow chart to enhance the accuracy and effectiveness of information provided by those employees managing phone calls from the public are also available. Employees also received a handout on proper hand-washing techniques, the CDC “Cover Your Cough” flyer, and a handout on simple ways to stay healthy during flu season and beyond.

### **Communicating with the Pinellas County Community**

Media coverage of the vaccine shortage created an immediate sense of alarm in the community. Pinellas County is home to a large number of senior citizens, who can be especially sensitive to media reports about access to flu vaccine. The main goal was to provide everyone in the community, including senior citizens, with as much information as possible in hopes of preventing widespread panic. With a few exceptions, the provision of timely and reliable information about the flu vaccine supply situation was associated with reduced public anxiety.

As a direct result of the large volume of phone calls that the PCHD received, we rapidly established a “Flu Information Line” as part of the menu options on our main telephone line (727-824-6900, option 2). The flu information line provides callers with the most current

information on the vaccine supply, suggestions for obtaining a flu shot and the recommendation that healthy individuals forgo vaccination this flu season. At the end of the recorded message, there is an option to press “0” to speak with someone further. The PCHD staff is regularly reminded to respond to questions from the public in a caring and compassionate way.

As is typically the case, PCHD flu shot outreach events were set to begin in October. We are honoring our commitments to these events by offering pneumonia vaccine where appropriate. Most of the flu-related outreach events were scheduled for locations with a sizable senior citizen population.

For individuals with access to the Internet, a “Flu Vaccine” component was added to our website (<http://www.pinellashealth.com/FluVac.asp>) that provides current flu information and links to CDC and Florida Department of Health (DOH) websites. A process was included within the PCHD Web site that allows visitors to post questions. Numerous inquiries were received and answered using this communication pathway. Additionally, handouts with prevention messages and CDC “Cover Your Cough” flyers were made available in PCHD health centers. PCHD employees, including receptionists, educate a diverse population about flu.

The Pinellas County Health Department produces a monthly TV show that airs on a local access channel. PCHD representatives appeared as a guest on the channel’s weekly talk show and its news show that airs daily for a month. Representatives discuss the vaccine shortage and flu prevention. The flu prevention message was paramount.

### **Communicating with Healthcare Partners**

Soon after learning about the vaccine shortage, nursing homes and assisted living facilities (ALFs) in Pinellas County were contacted to estimate their current census and to determine their need for flu vaccine would be if and when it became available.

Regular contact with the local medical society and area hospitals is made to keep the healthcare community informed. The PCHD immunization program manager speaks with physicians and office staff who call in, and also works with doctors to help them understand the process for contacting Aventis.

The October edition of *Epi Watch*, a monthly newsletter produced by the PCHD Epidemiology Program, included an article about influenza and the vaccine supply issue. The newsletter is circulated to infection control practitioners in hospitals and other facilities, epidemiologists in other health departments and other healthcare partners.

### **Communicating with the Media**

Pinellas County is located in the third largest media market in Florida, spanning at least five counties including the City of Tampa, located in adjacent Hillsborough County. The Pinellas County Health Department is often contacted for a media response to public health issues that impact the entire market. PCHD policy requires prompt and accurate responses to all media inquiries. The PCHD has responded to every reporter.

PCHD developed flu-related messages based on CDC and DOH guidelines. Key messages include:

- This year, individuals who are healthy should skip getting a flu shot to help ensure that those who are most vulnerable are vaccinated.
- Prevention plays an important part this year and every year.
- Be persistent in trying to find a flu shot if you are at risk.
- Health officials are working to get flu shots for our vulnerable population.

Since October 7, 2004, press releases are produced regularly that provide updates, reiterate CDC interim flu guidelines, express empathy for those at risk, and assure the public of a continuing search for flu vaccine doses for the at risk population.

## **Results**

Following CDC and Florida DOH guidance, vaccine doses were primarily distributed to nursing homes, hospitals, assisted living facilities, and to physicians with patients who are elderly or who have a chronic condition. The majority of at-risk individuals receiving flu vaccine during the 2004-2005 flu season are senior citizens.

During the 2003-2004 flu season, the health department was only responsible for vaccinating the public through its four healthcare centers as well as via outreach events. As such, the number of vaccine doses that were received and administered could be directly evaluated. The Department's role changed during the 2004-2005 flu season. We are now charged with coordinating the distribution of vaccine to providers throughout the county. Only one outreach event was possible under the new circumstances, where we administered 1,000 vaccine doses. Accordingly, although we can account for the number of vaccine doses that have been distributed, we cannot account for the number actually administered at non-Department sites throughout the county.

Due to the large volume of calls to the flu information line, we hired a temporary employee with customer service experience to speak with senior citizens and others, helping to answer their questions, as an assistant to our regular switchboard operator. Call volume varies, based largely on what's being said in the media on any given day. At the beginning of the shortage, we logged close to 1,000 calls a day. Then the number of calls decreased to 300-500 a day. In December, given the media stories, calls peaked at 982 daily calls, falling off again and then rising to lower peak daily values (see Table).

Callers are often anxious. Switchboard operators have provided accurate information while assuaging the callers' anxieties. The capacity of the flu-related phone system has been sufficient to handle all calls. The Department's switchboard operators have received praise from the public. Some citizens have even written to our director, thanking him for providing such a valuable public service.

Since the launch of the flu-information Web site, there have been almost 3,000 hits.

**Table.** The number of daily calls made to the flu information line in December 2004 (to-date).

Day	Date	Number of Calls
Wednesday	12/01	206
Thursday	12/02	170
Friday	12/03	982
Monday	12/06	303
Tuesday	12/07	90
Wednesday	12/08	83
Thursday	12/09	40
Monday	12/13	51
Tuesday	12/14	85
Wednesday	12/15	66
Thursday	12/16	100
Friday	12/17	157
Monday (as of 10:30 a.m.)	12/20	131

### Recommendations

- Identify key stakeholders and plan ways to communicate with each group.
- If appropriate, share the latest information with all stakeholders, at the same time.
- Work across departmental boundaries to ensure consistent messaging and to eliminate duplication of effort. Pride of ownership falls by the wayside in a crisis. What matters is getting the message out in an efficient and timely manner. Develop and maintain a team that includes the health department's senior leadership, the immunization program manager, the epidemiology program manager and the public information officer. Other individuals are consulted for their expertise in specific areas as needed. The team reviews and approves all information that goes to the public.
- Think of employees first. Employees are part of the community, too! Employees typically have a need to make informed personal decisions as well as answer question from family members and friends.
- Provide all employees with effective communication tools and accurate as well as up-to-date information, helping them to manage an anxious public and others.
- Be prepared with numbers and don't be afraid to share numbers with the media when asked. Also refer media to Internet links that contain statistical information.
- Communication policy process and channels should be established and updated in advance and typically include email, fax, flyers, newsletters, announcements, dedicated phone lines, special meetings, and Internet sites.
- Use culturally sensitive communications when possible. For example, Spanish-based flu information is available from the CDC (<http://www.cdc.gov/flu/espanol/>).
- Be proactive in working with the media. This should begin long before any crisis takes place.

- Give the public effective ways to get answers to their questions. For example, by providing an issue-specific phone line or an Internet site that allows questions from the public to be posted.
- Respond as quickly as possible to the public, stakeholders and the media with updated information.

### **Future Directions**

We plan to continually adapt PCHD policies and processes to effectively meet ongoing as well as future flu-related challenges.

### **References**

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### **Contact Information:**

Jeannine Mallory, M.P.A., Public Information Director (point of contact)  
 John P. Heilman, M.D., M.P.H., Director  
 Claude Dharamraj, M.D., M.P.H., FAAP, Assistant Director  
 Julia Gill, Ph.D., M.P.H., Epidemiology Program Manager  
 Darrell Pfalzgraf, Immunization Program Manager

Pinellas County Health Department  
 (727) 824-6908  
<http://www.pinellashealth.com/>